5 Biblical Ways to Defend Your Mental Health Against Ongoing World Conflicts

As mental health issues continue to spread throughout our society and the world, Terrence Harris shares 5 important and practical Biblical insights to help protect your mental health, considering the ongoing wars and conflicts we see today.

1. Mental Health Needs God's Truth

God's truth demands obedience, even against personal preference. Repentance and faith in Jesus Christ gives us new life and compels us to joyfully obey God's truth. Christ offers salvation to those who receive Him as Lord and Savior. Some think they can save the world by their own actions. Many hope to make the world a better place through charity or a perverted version of peace, love and unity. Any vision of peace that denies the return of Christ rejects the truth and ultimately collapses.

World conflicts aren't just a political issue—they are the result of humanity rejecting God's truth and replacing it with deception. The Bible speaks of a humanity that desires everything they see, physical pleasures, and the pride of life. All of these come from a sinful world that refuses to obey and submit to the Living God (1 John 2:16, 17). Consequently, we live in a decaying world (2 Peter 3:10, 1 Corinthians 7:31) of which no human can control or stop.

Anxiety, another symptom of humanity's brokenness, exists as a major issue within the mental health crisis today. Anxiety can express itself through a sensation of "being choked" and suffocating. Those who suffer from anxiety, like I once did, tend to also experience the sensation of "falling." Without

anchoring ourselves in God's truth, our emotions begin to interpret reality instead of responding to it.

Medication helped during my struggle with anxiety and mental health issues, but I improved when I relied less on my truth and more on God's truth. He has full authority over heaven and earth. Humanity assumes absolute control over our lives because we take God's grace for granted. This illusion of control contradicts the truth that God alone has authority over heaven and earth. When we align our lives with God's truth, we can experience freedom from the pressure to hold everything together on our own. This reduces and even frees us from undue stress and worry.

2. When Community Grows, Mental Health Improves

Some people serve in the military overseas, have loved ones fighting, or worry about the war's impact on American soil. Navigating war's presence and uncertainty is challenging. While war and violence exist, God doesn't want us to bear these challenges alone. Sometimes, a kind reminder that fear doesn't come from God (2 Timothy 1:7) is needed. If fear arises, remember God's love and care through others (Galatians 6:2, Hebrews 10:24-25). Having a solid group of family, friends, and trusted people is wise (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12). Helping each other through hard times keeps our mental health from
deteriorating because God created humanity for connection. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have distinct functions but exist as one. Togetherness and community are essential to the Living God. Created in His image, humanity must imitate God's likeness, seeking and building meaningful, God-honoring relationships, unity, and community in Christ.

3. Solitude: Where Mental Health Speaks

Jesus sought solitude to spend time with the Father (Mark 1:35, Luke 5:16, Mark 14:23).

Solitude differs from isolation. The Bible says isolating oneself is foolish and contrary to God's standard for community. Biblical solitude seeks intimacy with God, hearing His voice, experiencing His presence, and minimizing distractions. Finding sacred time to enjoy God's company improves mental health. This connects our hearts to the Father who made us and our interests. Ask God for solutions to mental health and navigating the world's brokenness.

4. Fasting: A Secret Weapon Against Mental Oppression

Jesus said, "When you fast and pray . . ." His words sound like a command, not an option.

Christians tend to focus on the physical benefits of fasting rather than the supernatural benefits. Queen Esther called for the Jews to fast on her behalf before entering her king's throne room uninvited—which could have resulted in her death (Esther 4:15-17). All the people of Ninevah (Jonah 3:5-10) fasted and repented for sinning after hearing Jonah preach, turning God's coming judgment away from the city. Daniel fasted while mourning and for understanding (Daniel 10:2). In Mark 9:29 (in some manuscripts), Jesus tells His disciples that prayer and fasting invites supernatural authority in deliverance from demonic oppression. Fasting exchanges the natural pleasures of food for a complete focus on God. Sometimes, our mental health needs relief from anxiety or comfort from life's hardships—especially in times of world conflicts. Other times, we may need God's mercy, favor, or His supernatural strength to overcome the challenges of an immaterial nature. Scripture has shown how fasting can turn the tides of worldly conflicts and challenging circumstances. Incorporating a fast that Yahweh commands and respects could be the spiritual discipline necessary for life's journey.

5. Enjoying Life: A Gift for Mental Health

No matter the difficulties we face in life, we can still trust

and believe that God gave us life to appreciate and enjoy, as well as experiences to enjoy along with it. In Ecclesiastes 5:18–21, we can discover a desirable pattern, one blessed by Yahweh that most Christians may overlook. One of the best things you can do for your mental health is to enjoy the work you do, developing the ability to enjoy the wealth it produces, and using the resources to create wonderful and exciting memories and experiences for yourself, your family, and others.

Unstable circumstances cannot sustain mental health in a world marked by ongoing conflict, uncertainty, and moral confusion. The wars and tensions we see around us reveal a deeper reality—humanity's rejection of God's truth. When we try to carry the weight of a broken world or place our hope in human solutions, mental health issues such as anxiety increase, and peace fades. But God has not left us without help. When we anchor our minds in His truth, walk in community, seek Him in solitude, practice spiritual discipline through fasting, and choose to enjoy the life He has given, we begin to experience stability in our mental health that the world cannot offer. True peace exists outside of trying to control outcomes, but in trusting the God who is already in control. As we align our lives with His truth, we protect our minds, strengthen our faith, and learn to live with confidence—even in the midst of a world at war.

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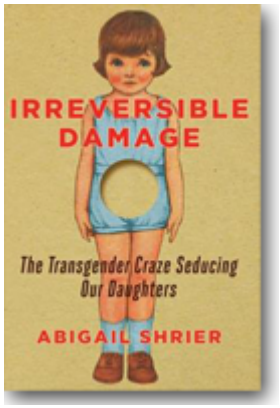
Transgenderism

Kerby Anderson provides an overview of the transgender craze that has taken over the western world in the past ten years, drawing on startling insights from Abigail Shrier and Ryan

Anderson.

Transgenderism is the belief that people have a "gender identity" that is distinct from their sex. If they feel there is a conflict between their gender and their sex, gender identity should take precedence. Although a very small fraction of the population may experience gender dysphoria, the current percentage of Americans identifying as transgender or nonbinary has exploded.

Gender Dysphoria Research



Abigail Shrier wrote about the transgender craze in her book *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*. When she joined me on my Point of View radio program, she explained that "gender dysphoria" was characterized by severe and persistent discomfort in one's biological sex. It typically begins in early childhood. In previous generations, it afflicted a sliver of the population (roughly .01 percent) and occurred mostly in boys.

Prior to 2012, there was no scientific literature on girls (11-21) ever having developed gender dysphoria at all. Then the Western world experienced a sudden surge of adolescents claiming to have gender dysphoria and self-identifying as "transgender."

In 2016, Lisa Littman (an ob-gyn, public health researcher) was scrolling through social media when she noticed a statistical peculiarity. Several adolescents (most of them girls) from a small town in Rhode Island had come out as transgender. In fact, they were all from the same friend group.

She admitted that she knew very little about gender dysphoria, but this statistical anomaly was interesting to her. And she then noticed there had been a sudden spike in the western

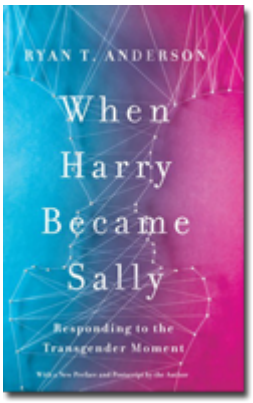
world of girls experiencing gender dysphoria. She immersed herself in the scientific literature on gender dysphoria to try to understand what was happening. Perhaps it was due to increased social acceptance of LGBTQ people, but she suggested in a peer-reviewed paper that the girls might be rushing toward “transition” because of peer contagion. As you might imagine, her suggestion was roundly criticized. She was also accused of anti-trans bigotry.

In a subsequent research project, she collected data anonymously from 256 parents whose kids had not met the criteria of gender dysphoria in childhood, but suddenly identified as transgender in adolescence. She identified 16 traits in common. Here are a few.

- The vast majority have zero indicators of childhood gender dysphoria.
- Almost a third of them did not seem at all gender dysphoric.
- A majority had one or more psychiatric diagnosis and almost half were engaged in self-harm prior to the onset of dysphoria.
- Nearly 70 percent of the teenagers belonged to a peer group in which at least one friend had also come out as transgender.
- Among parents who knew their children’s social status, over 60 percent said the announcement brought a popularity boost.
- Over 88 percent of the parents surveyed reported being supportive of transgender rights.

How to Respond to the Transgender Moment

Ryan Anderson is the author of the book, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment*. He explains how transgender ideology promotes the opportunity for children to change their gender with surgery and drugs. And parents "are told that puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones may be the only way to prevent their children from committing suicide."



Ryan Anderson countered that the best studies of gender dysphoria have found "that between 80 and 95 percent of children who express a discordant gender identity will come to identify with their bodily sex if natural development is allowed to proceed." He also documented that even children going through "transitioning" treatment still have an extraordinarily high rate of suicide attempts compared to the general population.

He reminded us that we should be tolerant and loving toward children (and adults) who struggle with their gender identity. But we should also be aware of the potential harm when transgender identity is normalized.

Unfortunately, we are living in a world where transgender activists want more than tolerance and kindness. They demand affirmation. We aren't allowed to question whether using medical treatments to aid in transgender transformation is positive for children. In his book, Ryan Anderson shows that the best biology, psychology, and philosophy support an understanding of sex as a bodily reality. As he puts it: "Biology isn't bigotry."

Abigail Shrier also offers several suggestions. **First, don't get your kid a smartphone**. She explains that nearly every problem teenagers face traces itself back to the introduction of the smartphone years ago.

Second, don't relinquish your authority as a parent. You don't

have to go along with every idea your teenager has, nor do you have to go along with every educational or psychological fad being promoted in society.

Third, don't support gender ideology in your child's education. She provides an example of what happens when schools do a seminar on anorexia or suicide. Often the prevalence increases. A small number of students may have gender confusion or gender dysphoria. But talking about it will spread confusion.

Finally, don't be afraid to admit that it's wonderful to be a girl.

While she talks about the benefits and opportunities of being a girl, Christians can go even further. We believe God is responsible for who we are and what we are. Each one of us is created in God's image (Genesis 1:26). We can celebrate girls and boys and encourage them to use their gender and their gifts to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 1:31).

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Addressing Anxiety in Tumultuous Times

Byron Barlowe connects the dots between the universal problem of anxiety, what brain science is teaching us about our minds, and how Scripture and spiritual disciplines can help. In a world consumed by violent riots and trauma surrounding the Covid virus, this is a timely topic that God and science speak to well.

Millions of people worldwide are battling anxiety in a

tumultuous time. The Coronavirus pandemic response has created a new abnormal: heightened fear of sickness and death, economic damage, and social isolation. Loneliness is the number one health crisis in America according to many epidemiologists, psychiatrists, and social scientists.{1} While we're all still reeling from this, racial strife has erupted into looting, killings, and anarchy in American streets.

Mental health is an increasing concern too. One study found that during the spring 2020 mass quarantine, prescriptions for anti-anxiety meds spiked.{2} A San Francisco area hospital has seen more deaths by suicide than by Covid-19, prompting a call for an end to mass shutdowns.{3} *It's been a perfect storm of stress.*

Are there real solutions *right now*? Yes, brain science is confirming the truths and promises proclaimed in Scripture in exciting ways! We have wonderfully adaptive minds—especially when they are focused on God. These built-in mind-morphing capabilities show the genius of our design as Image-bearers of God. Audiologist, cognitive researcher and outspoken Christian Dr. Caroline Leaf writes, "As an individual, you are capable of making mental and emotional change in your life. Through your thinking, you can actively recreate thoughts and, therefore, knowledge in your mind."{4}

And this has profound implications for true hope. Leaf continues: "Thoughts are real, *physical* things that occupy mental real estate. Moment by moment, every day, you are changing the structure of your brain through your thinking [it's happening right now as you read]. *When we hope, it is an activity of the mind that changes the structure of our brain in a positive and normal direction.*"{5} The biblical book of Hebrews defines faith as "the *substance* of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). The thankful, attentive, willfully hopeful mind creates positive emotions,

thoughts, and acts of the will. In other words, *we significantly control whether we have a healthy soul.*

Dallas Willard writes, "The transformation of the self away from a life of fear and insufficiency takes place as we fix our mind upon God as he truly is." As Scripture teaches, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." In this article we'll explore this transformation.

Morphing Your Mind—It's Mostly Up to You!

Everyday stress is hard enough—but what about work-related anxiety? Money? Riots, memories of abuse, bullying, and abandonment? We have little control over family, culture or epidemics. But we can make amazing internal changes through our responses. Science and Scripture *agree* on this.

The transforming mind-renewal encouraged by Scripture is possible for us all, especially for people who have invited God to lead their lives. We can intentionally train our minds to reshape our brains—we are *not* perpetual victims of our past or circumstances. Nor are humans mere products of matter in motion. Dr. Caroline Leaf, author of *Switch on Your Brain*, claims that "Choice is real, and free will exists. You are able to stand outside yourself, observe your own thinking, consult with God, and [work with him to] change the negative, toxic thought or grow a healthy, positive thought. When you do this, your brain responds with a positive neurochemical rush and structural changes that improve your intellect, health, and peace."{6}

Even traumatic memories can be starved, defanged, broken down, and replaced. Brought into conscious awareness, they can become plastic enough to be recreated. Leaf explains that "Neurons that don't get enough signal (that is, rehearsing of the negative event) will start firing apart, wiring apart, pulling out, and destroying the emotion attached to the trauma." Also, desirable brain chemicals that bond and remold

chemical connections, increase focus and attention, and increase feelings of peace and happiness begin to weaken traumatic memories even more. So bad memories, hatred, hurt, and other negative thoughts and emotions that form toxic beliefs: "If they stop firing together, they will no longer wire together. This leads to . . . rebuilding new ones."{7}

Ideas have consequences and our beliefs guide our behavior. In the words of King Solomon, "As a man thinks in his heart, so he is."{8} That is, we construct frameworks of beliefs and *then* speak and act from them.

Science seems to confirm this biblical view of self-control. Measuring magnetic fields, electrical impulses, chemical effects, photons, vibrations, and quantum energy paints a picture of intricately [networking] neurotransmitters, proteins, and energy—that is, signals—that change the brain's landscape.{9} This "neuroplasticity [seems to be] God's design for renewing the mind."{10}

And there's nothing magic about it: overcoming anxiety can be helped a lot through habits of the mind, heart, and soul.

Mindfulness & Meditation—Self-Control and Seeking God in Silent Solitude

It's no wonder that the concept of "mindfulness" has become a "thing" these days. Meditation and concentration are new-old survival skills. How do they work?

Dr. J.P. Moreland, noted philosopher and author of *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and The Practices That Brought Peace*, candidly shares his struggles with anxiety and the need he had for medications. He also discovered the power of seeking God in self-directed solitude. He emphasizes sustained habits of the praising, thankful, and self-controlled soul.

Mindful meditation is not like taking a drug, is not a quick fix, or denying the senses to rid oneself of desire.{11} "By charting new pathways in the brain, mindfulness can change the banter inside our heads from chaotic to calm."{12} New habits are formed over time. When it comes to our minds, "practice doesn't make perfect; it makes permanent."{13}

Remaining at rest via the practice of spiritual disciplines takes advantage of our mind's ability to "move into a highly intelligent, self-reflective, directed state." And the more often we go there, the more "we get in touch with the deep, spiritual part of who we are." This exercise switches brain modes in a way that can create wisdom and potential connection with God.{14} As Jesus taught his disciples, "Keep awake (give strict attention, be cautious and active) and watch and pray, that you may not come into temptation."{15} We can mentor our own minds, settle our souls, habituate
our hearts, and free our spirits to respond to God. Brain science is catching up on this reality.

So, what's going on physically when we stop to meditate in focused solitude and silence? A post at *Mindful.org* claims, "The impact that mindfulness exerts on our brain is borne from routine: a slow, steady, and consistent reckoning of our realities, and the ability to take a step back, become more aware, more accepting, less judgmental, and less reactive. . . . Mindfulness over time can make the brain, and thus [ourselves], more efficient regulators, with a penchant for pausing to respond to our world instead of mindlessly reacting."{16} How different would social media conversations be—especially on politics and race—if more people practiced patient contemplation!

Various regions of our brains change while meditating. The "fight or flight" area actually shrinks in size.{17} It's a real chill pill!

God keeps "him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You,

because he trusts in You."{18}

Thankfulness and Happiness—Healthy Habits of the Mind & Heart

In trying times, we all want to return to happiness. It's a God-given right to pursue it, according to America's founders. The biblical worldview recognizes the inherent brokenness of both creation and human beings, so it is no surprise that confusion, discord, and tragedy—along with evil spiritual powers—"steal, kill, and destroy"{19} our joy. What can be done?

Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland writes, "You have it in your power to begin a regimen of choices, assuming you would choose the right things, and form a habit of this that can *substantially improve your happiness and decrease or get rid of anxiety.* There really is hope."{20} Our non-conscious mind turns thoughts over and over. Through spiritual disciplines, we bring these into our conscious awareness, which manipulates actual proteins, creating overhauled memories. Intentionally bringing God to mind—His attributes, the wonder of creation and His blessings, promises, answered prayers—such a focus leads to a cycle of good thinking, feeling, and *knowing* that turns into believing real truth. Faith is a gift so we're not alone in doing this. But it is up to us to put to use the gifts described here to "work out [our] salvation with [reverence and proper humility]."{21}

Remember, we have a strong influence in reshaping our own brains—especially with God's help. Secular scientists are discovering the wonderful power of thankfulness. Scientific studies prove seven benefits according to *PsychologyToday.com*. Gratitude improves relationships, physical and mental health, sleep, self-esteem, and mental resilience. It even reduces aggression, the urge for revenge. Scripture aligns with physical reality again when it tells us: "Don't worry about

anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus."{22}

Moreland jokes, "If we're not careful, we may even come to think we were designed to flourish best when we are thankful and grateful! Yet as exciting as these psychological studies are, we didn't need them to know the importance and value of expressing gratitude and thanksgiving to God. The Bible insists on this . . . [it's] filled to overflowing with exhortations to be grateful to God and express thanksgiving to him."{23} As King David famously prayed in Psalm 23, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life"—he trusted a good God to lead, protect, and bless him. That's joy far beyond happiness!

Takeaways & Practical Applications

Brain networks form an inner life of the mind. We can switch between various networks constantly. Like a mom monitoring kids running around inside several contained rooms, this enables us to control the controllable—our reactions to events and circumstances. Brain scans confirm how we capture and police rogue thoughts in ways prescribed in Scripture: "We . . . take every thought captive to obey Christ."{24}

UCLA researchers address how our habitual non-conscious thoughts can drive anxiety—negative self-talk like:

- "I'll be in real trouble if…"
- "What if so and so happens next week?"
- "I'll probably fail that exam!"

"It's what we say to ourselves in response to any particular situation that mainly determines our mood and feelings."{25}

“Forming a new habit requires doing things you may not want to do in the early stages of formation,” as any coach or teacher will tell you.

For retraining our brains, experts have devised methods like **The Four Step Solution**:

It goes as follows:{26}

Step 1: Relabeling: call out thoughts as having no necessary connection with reality: tell yourself “That is a destructive lie.” Call on Proverbs 4:23, “Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life.”{27}

Step 2: Reframing: take the power out of the bad thoughts. Reset your perception of the deceptive message by being mindful that it exists, its content, and how you are now feeling by correctly categorizing the distorted message. Bad self-talk includes:

- all or nothing thinking (for example: “it was a *total* failure”)
- overgeneralizing
- singling out one thing to focus on
- catastrophizing (or making too big a deal out of things) and
- discounting the positive

Reframing them creates stable memories formed by repeated updating.

Step 3: Refocusing: Set your mind on anything else—distract yourself from the negative thoughts. Stop obsessing! Get into “the flow” of something. Focus elsewhere. And don’t ruminate about the message—analyzing it will deepen the grooves in your brain.

Step 4: Revaluing: After a while, reflect on how you did Steps 1-3. Recommit to repeat these steps throughout the day.

Over 21 days, a "newly formed neural network" will decay in less than a month: thoughts are like muscles that atrophy and die or get stronger with use.{28} Starve the bad, feed the good.

As Paul instructed the Philippian church, dwell on what is good and pure, true and worthy of praise.{29}

Notes

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4. Dr. Caroline Leaf, *Switch on Your Brain: The Key to Peak Happiness, Thinking and Health*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013, p. 19 (emphasis mine).
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17. Various Authors, *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, Volume 191, Issue 1, 30 January 2011, Pages 36-43. Posted Nov. 10, 2010: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S092549271000288X.
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21. Ephesians 2:12, Amplified Bible.
22. Philippians 4: 6-7, New Living Translation.
23. *Finding Quiet*, 113.
24. 2 Corinthians 10:5.
25. Psychologists Edmund Bourne and Lorna Garano, cited by Moreland.
26. Entire section, *Finding Quiet*, p. ?
27. Proverbs 4:23, CSB.
28. Leaf, 151.
29. Philippians 4:8.

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Responding to Poverty – As a

Christian

Poverty’s Devastating Effects

I can still remember the feelings of curiosity, confusion and discomfort I felt as a watched the young boys. “What did those kids want?” I wondered.

As a child visiting Cuba with my parents, I was startled when some boys at a city park opened our taxi doors, then held out their hands. Later I asked my mother, “Did they work there? Did they want a tip?” She gently told me they were begging. My young upper-middle-class North American sensibilities were jolted by the harsh reality of poverty I had never seen.

One summer during university, while visiting Tijuana, Mexico, I was stunned to see people living in the city dump. Later that summer, I spent time with a friend in one of Miami’s ghettos. One day, as I drove away, I noticed an ambulance headed toward the apartment building near where my friend hung out. The next day, my friend told me a woman had shot the man who was trying to seduce her, then she shot herself. Shocking as that news was for me, almost as much so was my friend’s nonchalance. He seemed accustomed to events like this.

Those experiences kindled my personal interest in this theme. What is poverty? Why does it exist? How does it destroy minds and souls as well as bodies? What is a biblical perspective on poverty? And what should we do about it?

Income level and standard of living are often-used but insufficient measures of poverty. Some townships in South Africa and shanty towns in the Philippines make some North American housing projects seem like the Ritz.

Localized “relative deprivation” (i.e., large socioeconomic disparity between the poor and middle class) can multiply

feelings of low self-esteem. Many social scientists emphasize psychological manifestations of poverty. Yale psychologist Ira Goldenberg defined poverty as “a psychological process which destroys the young before they can live and the aged before they can die. . . . [It] is a condition of being in which one’s past and future meet in the present—and go no further.”{1}

The precise economic line may be difficult to draw, but poverty’s effects can be devastating. Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs says, “More than 8 million people around the world die each year because they are too poor to stay alive. Every morning our newspapers could report, ‘More than 20,000 people perished yesterday of extreme poverty.'”{2} They die from disease, lack of medicine, unsafe drinking water.

Homeless Assistance

The little girl was sleeping so peacefully on a cot in the nursery playroom. As I watched her, I imagined how she might have felt only a few days earlier, maybe trying to sleep in the tropical heat under a noisy highway overpass. Now she was inside a lovely, air conditioned room with nice toys. She and families just like hers could feel safe, clean and protected at Miami’s Homeless Assistance Center, a facility organized and run through a coalition of community leaders, government agencies, churches, and faith-based organizations.

By its twelfth year, Miami’s Community Partnership for Homeless had helped over twenty-seven thousand men, women and children leave the streets for a better life. Their Homeless Assistance Centers are a community success story in which private and public sectors teamed to create a national model for eliminating homelessness. Would you believe all this started from a church Bible class?

My friend Alvah Chapman served Knight Ridder Publishers as president and chairman for fourteen years. (Knight Ridder owned, for example, the *Miami Herald*, *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *San Jose Mercury News*.) At retirement, he and his wife Betty participated in a thirty-nine-week church Bible study class that required personal application.

Alvah had become distressed observing the plight of Miami's homeless and the lack of community leadership. He recalls, "The county said it was a city problem. The city said it was a county problem. And the Chamber of Commerce was not sure it was their problem."{3} The Chapmans decided to tackle homelessness. "The commitment to 'do something' was very strong" in their hearts, he explains: "We made a commitment to our [Bible] class and to our God that we would together provide leadership to the homeless problem in Miami."{4}

Today the Homeless Assistance Centers{5} they founded provide meals, showers, clothing, temporary housing, laundry facilities, health care, transportation, and job training—helping residents get back on their feet with dignity. The success rate for departed residents has been as high as sixty percent, considered remarkable in this field. Churches and synagogues have provided evening meals, companionship, and encouragement.

Often the poor feel trapped in poverty with no way out. Vicious circles breed feelings of worthlessness and despair. Drunkenness, violence, teen pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases are just some of the physical manifestations of coping with life out of control. Efforts like the Homeless Assistance Centers can help break the cycle of poverty.

Helping the Total Person

Poverty brings multiple problems: physical, psychological, and

spiritual. Which should we emphasize in seeking solutions? Consider three approaches.

1. The *Outside-In Approach* changes circumstances to alleviate stress factors. Education and job training can enhance employment and living standards, thus decreasing psychological problems. Right? Not necessarily. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis argued that an elimination of physical poverty may not by itself eliminate the culture of poverty.{6} Perhaps you know some wealthy but unhappy people.

2. The *Inside-Out Approach* emphasizes counseling to encourage self-help. Attitude change is important, but if the economic system blocks options, what then?

3. The *Total-Person Approach* blends the other two, treating humans as physical, psychological, and spiritual creatures. The often-overlooked spiritual area, properly tapped, can influence both poor and rich.

John Perkins, an African-American, left his poor rural hometown of Mendenhall, Mississippi, vowing never to return. His brother had been shot by a policeman in that racially oppressed town. Later, Perkins placed his faith in Christ and returned to Mendenhall to help.

The organization he founded facilitated an inexpensive health care center, cooperative farms, a cooperative food store, house construction, tutoring, and raising college scholarships. Perkins' emphasis has been on helping local people help themselves. At the same time he's said, "I believe that the only commitment able to bring [interpersonal and community] healing is a commitment to Jesus."{7}

Jesus of Nazareth emphasized the total person. He healed the sick and fed the hungry. He also told people how they could find meaning and fulfillment through faith in Him. Many Christian development programs have a similar focus, operating on the time-honored philosophy that if you give someone a fish

you can feed them for a day; if you also teach them how to fish you can feed them for a lifetime.

World Relief, a Christian organization, provides worldwide disaster relief as well as self-help efforts like well-digging and agricultural training. Their microenterprise development programs establish community banking, savings and lending programs to help the poor become self sufficient. For example, a $75 loan to a Cambodian grandmother allowed her to expand her small home-front stand. She repaid the loan in full, entitling her to another, slightly larger loan. Eventually, she could support her sixteen grandchildren and serve as a role model for women in her village.{8}

World Vision, the Salvation Army, and most major Christian denominations have programs to help the poor.

Money and Poverty

We've been examining physical, psychological, and spiritual factors related to poverty and its possible remedies. Consider a common question.

Will money given to developing nations solve their poverty problems? Maybe it will help, but the extent depends largely on how the funds are managed. Sadly, Africa, for instance, is replete with examples of crooked officials diverting financial aid and national wealth into their own pockets. For instance, Nigeria's President Obasanjo estimates that corrupt African leaders have stolen at least $140 billion from their people in the decades since independence.{9}

Obasanjo is a follower of Jesus who has tried to root out corruption in his own nation. The *New York Times* gives a glimpse into the task he still faces. Nigeria export billions of dollars of oil each year and returns thirteen percent of revenues from its states back to the states. The *Times* notes that "Much of that is siphoned off by corrupt regional

officials who often pocket the money or waste it on lavish projects that do little, if anything, for ordinary people. For instance, one state produces a third of Nigeria's oil and has an annual budget of more than half a billion dollars to spend on its three million people. But most of [that money] goes to white elephants like a mansion for the governor and his deputy."{10}

On one of my speaking tours to Nigeria, a local doctor told me how businesses had adapted to the common custom of using bribes. Seems they started budgeting bribe money for their traveling representatives to use. The budget item was called public relations. But a problem arose when employees began to pocket the public relations money instead of using it for bribes.

Financial aid givers—nations, businesses and individuals—would be wise to focus on strict accountability measures and perhaps character education programs for government and business leaders and students in such situations.

In fairness, I should note that this corruption caveat has its critics. Columbia economist Jeffrey Sachs, who also heads an ambitious United Nations anti-poverty effort, feels the corruption charge is too often a simplistic explanation for poverty's root problems. While I feel that corruption is indeed a major concern, I agree with Sachs that poverty is complex and situations differ. Disease plays a significant role. If people are sick with malaria or AIDS, its hard for them to help themselves. Sachs also advocates international commitments to economic assistance, scientific advancement, and justice.{11}

What Can You Do?

Would you believe that by losing weight, you could help the poor overseas? Consider how some upscale U.S. secondary school students made a difference in Zambia.{12}

Student leaders at Wheaton Academy in suburban Chicago had a burden to raise $53,000 from their fellow students for a schoolhouse in Zambia. They found little enthusiasm at first, but then they began to pray regularly. Things took off and they exceeded their goal. Over a three-year stretch, the Christian students raised nearly a quarter of a million dollars for HIV/AIDS relief in Africa. Students encourage each other to forgo movies, Starbucks runs, and even Christmas presents and prom dresses.{13} The campus chaplain estimates that ninety percent of students have participated financially to build the schoolhouse and a medical clinic and to feed a villages children for a year. Students feel a personal connection with their Zambian peers. Some have visited the village they support.

Even adults joined the effort. Now, what they did is great. I bet you're going to like this! It was a weight-loss fundraising campaign, the Zambia Meltdown. Fourteen teachers and administrators lost 460 pounds over 100 days. That brought in $19,000 in pledges for lost weight. And get this: The headmaster and principal each lost 70 pounds.{14}

What can you do to help alleviate poverty? Consider some suggestions:

> *First, pray. God's concern for the poor far exceeds our own. Those Wheaton Academy students saw answers to their prayers. (Probably some faculty spouses did, too!)*
>
> *Second, give. An ancient Jewish proverb says, If you help the poor, you are lending to the Lord—and he will repay you!{15} Many fine organizations can use your donations to effectively fight poverty. New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof says, "Nobody gets more bang for the buck than missionary schools and clinics, and Christian aid groups like World Vision and Samaritan's Purse save lives at bargain-basement prices."{16} I would add World Relief, the Salvation Army and your local church to the list.*

Third, go. Maybe you can volunteer with Habitat for Humanity or an international mission group. CNN highlighted Campus Crusade for Christ college students spending Spring Break helping to rebuild New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. You even may want to devote your life or career to relief and development. It is a worthy cause. I like what Jesus' mother Mary advised: "Whatever He [Jesus] says to you, do it."{17} And another of those ancient Jewish proverbs says, "Blessed are those who help the poor."{18}

Notes

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17. John 2:5 NASB.
18. Proverbs 14:21 NLT.

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